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**ERASMUS STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ENGLISH-MEDIUM
INSTRUCTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA**

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on attitudes and experiences of international students who participated in the Erasmus Programme at the University of Rijeka (UNIRI) in the academic year 2014/2015. English-medium instruction (EMI) at UNIRI is still rather unexplored and calls for more research and better understanding. The data presented here show that incoming students are generally satisfied with different aspects of their studies in Rijeka, including quality of courses offered, lecturers' teaching and support, and are more than willing to recommend this university to their peers. However, there are still many aspects of EMI courses that need to be improved, such as the level of some teachers' proficiency and local students' support.

Keywords: English-medium instruction, internationalization of higher education, the University of Rijeka, Erasmus, international students

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1 Introduction

In today's society, where globalization and internationalization are commonly used terms, almost every aspect of human life is part of a complex process of worldwide integration. Universities, "more than any other segment of society [...] are engaged constantly in the international exchange of ideas, data and knowledge" (Altbach 2008: 7). The strong relationship between internationalization and higher education is stimulated by "commercial advantage, knowledge and language acquisition, enhancing the curriculum with international content, and many others. Specific initiatives such as branch campuses, cross-border collaborative arrangements, programs for international students, establishing English-medium programs and degrees, and others have been put into place as part of internationalization" (Altbach and Knight 2007: 290).

The introduction of the Bologna Process was a logical consequence of this internationalization. It was "a political commitment to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) [...]" (Veiga, Magalhães and Amaral 2015: 85) and aimed to "strengthen the competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education and to foster student mobility and employability [...]", as stated on the official Bologna Process website (Bologna Process-European Higher Education Area 2014).

Since its implementation, the number of students and academic staff participating in exchange increased dramatically, and "students and academics are more mobile than ever before, and competition for both is becoming fiercer" (Coleman 2006: 3). The same author explains that the students are now customers and universities no longer institutions but brands.

As part of the Bologna Process, cooperation and partnership between international universities were established. This led to the development of one of the leading programmes

of student and staff mobility in Europe – the Erasmus Programme. It is actually “the largest mobility scheme for higher education in Europe and the flagship program of the European Union (EU). Over 4,000 higher education institutions from over 30 countries take part in the program” (Souto-Otero et al. 2013: 2). The experts predict that by 2025 about 15 million students will study abroad (Altbach and Knight 2013).

All of these processes, reforms and phenomena described above imply the usage of the English language as world’s global language, especially in educational environment. Svartvik and Leech (2006: 232) describe English as being “a ticket to advancement”. EMI is similarly “thought to be a passport to a global world” (Dearden 2014: 16). Some argue that Bologna “made English-medium education a reality” (Smit and Dafouz 2012: 3). It might also be the case that EMI made Bologna objectives come true. The only thing that cannot be debated is the interconnection of the two.

The main reasons why European universities offer programs in English are: “to attract international students, to prepare domestic students for the global labor market, to raise the profile of the institution“ (Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra 2011: 3–4). However, there are several preconditions that have to be met for successful implementation of EMI programmes. Some of them are better organization of study programmes and financial means, as well as lecturers’ and students’ positive perceptions of the initiative (Klaassen and de Graaf 2001).

The most frequently mentioned difficulties and challenges are additional student and teacher workload, insufficient student competency in foreign language, interference of language ability with exam results, lower knowledge transfer, lack of students demand, lower quality of course content, etc. (Gürtler and Konewald 2015). The international students’ perceptions, however, have been rarely investigated, especially in non-English speaking countries. To our knowledge, no such study has been conducted in Croatian context at all. Therefore, the aim of this study was to collect data about international students’ experiences

at UNIRI, which can contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning conditions for future international students at our university.

In the first part of the present paper, I will explain the present status of EMI in the Croatian context and give brief overview of previous research on the topic of EMI. In the second part, I will describe aims, research questions, participants and research methods. The results will be presented in the third part, and discussed in the fourth. The conclusion with final remarks, limitations of the study and recommendations for further research will be given at the end.

1.1 EMI in the Croatian context

The implementation of English-taught programmes has been rapidly increasing around the world. And “while some countries are well represented at the top of ranking charts, others are just joining the race and testing out different strategies to improve their positions” (Yudkevich, Altbach and Rumbley 2015: 1). Croatia is one of these countries that are just starting to work their way up the international ladder.

Furthermore, “the data about international and national mobility in HE is rather scarce in Croatia. A comprehensive database or monitoring system for mobility data does not exist” (Šćukanec 2013: 13). The same author mentions that Croatia joined EU Lifelong Learning Programme, and since then the mobility has been increasing constantly. On the official site of the European Commission, where Erasmus higher education statistics for 2013–2014 were published, the number of incoming students in Croatia (including both traineeships and studies) grew from 700 in 2012/2013 to 987 in 2013/2014.

This rapid increase in mobility in higher education in Croatia was “[...] driven by the Bologna Process, which Croatia joined in 2001” (Šćukanec 2013: 7). With Bologna, several aspects of higher education have been improved, such as the Croatian participation in EU

programmes of international mobility. It was, however, assumed that “Bologna process harmonizes entire academic systems to ensure compatible degree structures, transferable credits and equal academic qualifications throughout the EU” (Altbach and Knight 2007: 293). However, this integration of studies is very often far from the truth, as indicated in the following comment: “[...] in spite of the action of ERASMUS program and compatibility efforts in the context of Bologna process, recognition is not always a reality in practice” (Souto-Otero et al. 2013: 6). In addition, the survey on the implementation of the Bologna Process among Croatian students (Anketa o provedbi Bolonjskog procesa na sveučilištima u Hrvatskoj (Sveučilištu u Zagrebu, Rijeci, Splitu, Zadru i Osijeku)) shows that almost third of the respondents think that Bologna reform led to lower quality of studies and was implemented too rapidly without necessary preparation.

Additional concern is that EMI courses and programmes would be as rapidly and ineffectively introduced as some aspects of Bologna Process were. It must be noted, however, that more and more attention is given to the implementation of EMI at UNIRI. An example of the initiative to improve EMI practice at UNIRI was the three-year project entitled *The Development of Study Programmes in English*, which ended this year. One of the outcomes of this Project is the lifelong learning programme entitled *Language Support for Teachers in EMI*, held annually at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

1.2 Previous research on students’ experience of EMI

Literature on EMI and its implementation at universities across the world is extensive. However, the teachers’ attitudes and experiences of EMI have been investigated much often than the students’ perceptions of this growing phenomenon.

In the Croatian context, teachers’ attitudes (Drljača Margić and Vodopija-Krstanović 2015) and local students’ attitudes (Drljača Margić and Žeželić 2015) have been investigated,

but to our knowledge, no research has been conducted among international students participating in EMI programmes at Croatian universities.

When it comes to the previous research into the attitudes and experiences of international students, Heigham (2014) investigated international students' experiences of EMI programmes offered at Japanese university. The results show that the participants feel disappointed and frustrated with administrative staff, which they describe as not adequately trained and not responsible for anything. The participants also think that there are not enough English-medium courses offered, and some of them even report having difficulties with understanding their teachers' English.

A similar study, in Japan, was conducted by Wallitsch (2014). The author enquired into the experience of a group of international students participating in an English language degree programme. International students encounter several challenges with interpreting Japanese social order and engaging in meaningful relationships with locals, and feel responsible for lack of communication.

Several other studies have been conducted in English-speaking countries. Sherry, Thomas and Chui (2009) investigated international students' experiences in the English-speaking context. Many international students have difficulties understanding culture and socially appropriate behaviour as well as establishing friendships with local American students, and experience financial problems.

Andrade (2006) also explored international students' adjustment issues and their influence on academic achievement in English-speaking universities. The results show that international students have greater adjustment difficulties, they more often feel stress and anxiety, and find interaction and teamwork with local students to be problematic.

The findings of another study (Sawir 2005) show that students' prior English language knowledge influences their academic success at Australian universities and that they are not

able to communicate very effectively, socially or academically. It is suggested that Australian universities should pay more attention to the language difficulties experienced by international students.

More recently, Hellekjær (2010) and Grit, Meijer and Salm (2012) investigated both international and local students' experiences of EMI. The results of the first study show that international students have greater difficulties with comprehension of EMI lectures than local students. The results of the second study show that both local and international students find teachers' didactic skills more important than teachers' language skills.

Another study (Souto-Otero et al. 2013) shows that international students find difficulties with administrative procedures, credit recognition, and lack of studies as most frequent barriers to participation in the Erasmus Programme.

2 The present study

2.1 Aims

The processes of globalization and internationalization of higher education have grown in importance in the last few decades. More than ever before, universities are establishing partnerships and collaborations with other international universities in order to attract new students from abroad. This is extremely important because “without students there is no university. Universities want the best students. Sourcing excellent students, however, can no longer be limited to the first language (L1) area: in many cases there are simply not enough excellent domestic students to meet the wishes of the national universities. The institutions are therefore striving to attract such students from other countries, and in many cases that will mean enticing students through EMI programmes” (Wilkinson 2013: 4). The implementation of EMI programmes is but far from simple, requires time and costs money. One of the first steps that we consider to be important for successful implementation is to get a closer insight into the attitudes and experiences of those actively involved in this process, i.e. to explore international students’ difficulties while studying abroad, their perceptions regarding advantages and disadvantages they encounter, in order to better understand their needs and experiences. Bearing this in mind, we tried to investigate their satisfaction with the delivery of EMI courses, as well as their experience of exchange period at UNIRI in general.

The aim of the study was to investigate international students' experiences of EMI at UNIRI. To be more concrete, we wanted to find out to what extent they were satisfied with a) general aspects of their exchange period at UNIRI, and b) specific aspects of their lecturers’ teaching and language. A related aim was to find out more about international students’ attitudes and feelings developed during their stay in Rijeka. Another aim was to investigate international students’ suggestions for further improvement of EMI courses. Additional aim

was to explore why they chose UNIRI as their host institution, how they perceived their own proficiency in English considering four language skills and to obtain basic information about their studies.

2.2 Research questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent were international students satisfied with different aspects of their studies?
2. Which aspects of EMI lecturers' teaching and language need improvement?
3. What needs to be done in order to improve current EMI courses and to successfully implement new EMI courses at UNIRI?

2.3 Participants

The sample comprised 49 international students who were on an exchange at UNIRI in the academic year 2014/15. All participants spent either winter or summer semester at UNIRI and came from 16 different countries, namely Poland (13), Spain (5), Czech Republic (4), Latvia (4), United Kingdom (4), Finland (3), Romania (3), Slovenia (2), Greece (2), Macedonia (2), Germany (2), Italy (1), Slovakia (1), Austria (1), Portugal (1), and Malta (1). Four participants have English as their first language.

The majority of respondents (49%) were graduate students who studied at eight different constituent institutions at UNIRI, namely the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, the Academy of Applied Arts, the Faculty of Engineering, the Faculty of Law, the Faculty of Maritime Studies, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Faculty of Teacher Education, and the Faculty of Economics.

The results of participants' self-assessment show that participants perceive their command of all four skills (listening, writing, reading, and speaking) to be very good or excellent. However, receptive skills are rated higher than the productive skills, with 3.94 average for listening and reading, 3.89 for speaking and 3.74 for writing on the Likert scale ranging from 1 ('poor') to 5 ('excellent').

2.4 Research method

The data were collected by means of an online survey via Survey Monkey. The International Relations Office staff at UNIRI provided the author with email addresses of 150 international students who took part in the Erasmus exchange at UNIRI in 2014/15. The survey was sent via email, and 49 students filled in the questionnaire. The survey was conducted from July 11 to August 11, 2016. It was structured as a questionnaire, including different types of questions such as Likert scale questions, multiple-choice questions, yes/no question, and open-ended questions.

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. The first part of the questionnaire was composed to gain insights into participants' personal data such as home country, first language, year of study, and host institution. Furthermore, the participants were asked to self-assess their English proficiency in terms of the four skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading). This was followed by a question regarding the reasons for choosing UNIRI as an Erasmus-exchange destination, and by four questions enquiring into the form of studies, form of lectures, number of subjects and time spent in class.

The second part of the questionnaire aimed to gain a closer insight into the participants' experience of different aspect of their studies. Firstly, they were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with the quality and number of English-taught courses, quality of teaching, and the support provided by the International Relations Office staff, teachers and

local students. Secondly, they were asked to assess several aspects of their lecturers' teaching (checking understanding, feedback, body language, presentation skills, spontaneity, clarifying terminology, classroom management, maintaining students' attention) and lecturers' language (pronunciation, speed of delivery, clarity, paraphrasing, grammar, vocabulary).

The third part of the questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The participants were asked to share not only their attitudes but also their feelings towards the exchange period at UNIRI. Thereafter followed questions about difficulties they encountered and aspects that did not meet their expectations, if any. In addition, they had to assess the general experience of EMI courses at UNIRI.

In the fourth part of the questionnaire the participants were asked to indicate to what extent UNIRI teachers need to improve their language, pedagogic and intercultural competence. This was followed by their suggestions for establishing (more) effective EMI courses at UNIRI. The final yes/no question investigated whether they would recommend UNIRI for students exchange to any of their peers or friends. An extra space for additional comments was provided at the end.

Most of data collected were analysed using an online instrument Survey Monkey. Answers to the closed-ended questions were automatically converted into numerical scores, while open-ended questions were coded by the author. Responses collected were anonymous. Both questions and students' answers were in English.

3 Results

3.1 Reasons for choosing UNIRI for Erasmus exchange

The majority of the respondents (41%) chose the UNIRI for their exchange period on the basis of the courses offered. Approximately 37% of other respondents decided to come because it was recommended to them or simply by coincidence (25%). None of the respondents indicated “academic reputation of the university” to have any influence on their decision. They did, however, specify some other reasons for choosing this specific university: a) weather, b) late start of the semester, c) interesting culture, d) the city and the location/seaside, and e) low cost of living.

3.3 Basic characteristics of EMI lectures at UNIRI

The basic aspects of students’ studies referred to the form of their studies, the form of lectures, the number of subjects, and time spent in lectures. When it comes to the form of lectures, 50% of lectures were predominantly teacher-centred, while 43% of lectures were learner-centred.

Considering the form of studies that international students took part in, the majority of respondents (62%) had lectures with both local and other international students. Approximately 14% of respondents had lectures with only local students, 12% with only other international students, while 9% of respondents had individual contact hours with the teacher. Some respondents indicate that exact form of studies cannot be easily specified and changes constantly:

#2 “*Total mess!*”

#11 “*All of the above.*”

When it comes to the number of subject they had, the average number is seven. The lowest number was one, mentioned by only one participants, and the highest number was 13, mentioned by three participants. In addition, when the respondents were asked how many hours per week they had spent in lectures or individual contact hours, the findings show that 15 hours per week is an average.

3.4 International students' experience of different aspects of their studies

The respondents were rather satisfied with all aspects of their EMI studies. A great majority of the respondents (83%) were either mostly satisfied (57%) or completely satisfied (26%) with the quality of English-taught courses. Results are rather similar for all other aspects: almost 77% of the respondents were either mostly (42%) or completely satisfied (35%) with the number of courses offered, 84% were either mostly (41%) or completely satisfied (43%) with the support of the International Relations Office staff, 80% were either mostly (57%) or completely satisfied (23%) with the quality of teaching, 82% were either mostly (43%) or completely satisfied (39%) with the teachers' support, and finally, 73% of the respondents were either mostly (39%) or completely satisfied (34%) with the local students' support. The difference between ratings of previously stated aspects was low, but clear. The lowest average on the Likert scale from 1 ('completely dissatisfied') to 5 ('completely satisfied') was the score for the number of English-taught courses and the quality of teaching (3.93).

When assessing different aspects of their lecturers' teaching on the Likert scale, the respondents rated the majority of aspects as either good or very good. The lowest average was assigned to the spontaneity in teaching (3.32), maintaining students' attention (3.39), constructive feedback (3.45), logical presentation of content, and asking questions to students (3.57). The average for clarifying terminology, presentation skills and examining students was 3.61, body language 3.68, checking understanding 3.70, classroom management 3.77, and

interacting with students 3.82. The respondents rated “interacting with students” with the highest score (3.82).

Considering the aspects of their lecturers’ language, the half of the respondents (50%) rated lecturers’ knowledge of specialist terminology as very good, and almost half of the respondents (48%) rated the vocabulary range as very good. Knowledge of grammar (45%) and general proficiency in English (40%) were also rated as very good. Other aspect, such as clarity of speech (43%), speed of delivery and ability to paraphrase (40%) were rated as good. Lecturers’ pronunciation was rated as good (36%), but with the lowest average score of 3.4.

3.5 International students’ attitudes and feelings towards their EMI studies

The vast majority of the respondents (76%) think that their English competences have mostly (38%) or completely (38%) improved during the exchange period. Approximately 43% of them mostly consider themselves to be proficient enough to successfully take part in an EMI course. Thirty-one per cent of the respondents think that it is important to have a native speaker as a teacher. Nearly the same number of the respondents (33%) think that, outside the classroom, local and international students do not interact often. The majority of the respondents are not quite sure whether students adjust to teachers’ accent over time (38%). Another 41% of the respondents mostly or completely agree that the EMI courses should be more learner-centred, while almost half of them do not know if this applies to them.

More than half of the respondents (52%) feel completely accepted by teachers, while almost half of them (49%) feel mostly accepted by local students. Furthermore, almost half of them (45%) consider themselves completely competent to follow lectures, and 42% mostly feel comfortable speaking English in class.

3.6 Difficulties encountered during exchange period and other aspects that did not meet respondents' expectations

The respondents mention several difficulties that they encountered during their studies at UNIRI. These difficulties can be grouped into following categories: a) courses, b) lecturers' proficiency, c) students' proficiency, d) administrative issues, and e) other, such as homesickness and problems with accommodation.

Although the majority of respondents are generally satisfied with the number and the quality of English-taught courses at UNIRI, here is a sample of the responses given by individuals who had difficulties and negative experience of this aspect of their studies:

#3 "There were not many classes offered in English at the Department of Psychology, that's the main reason why I had to take all of my lectures in Croatian. This did help me develop my Croatian knowledge more, but it wasn't part of the learning agreement."

#32 "1) Only a few classes that I wanted were available. 2)We didn't have any lectures because the number of English speaking students was deemed too low to create a class in the department of Law at UNIRI and we only had to handle assignments. 3)Too many and quite difficult and time consuming assignments. 4) The assignments were given a little late to us so we had a little time to write them."

#36 "Not that many subjects taught in English."

Some of the respondents identify several difficulties with the level of lecturers' proficiency in English:

#19 *“Some professors had problems with English. Therefore the quality of a few courses was very bad.”*

#21 *“With one class specifically, a lecturer spoke very little English and it was much harder to communicate.”*

#28 *“Teachers and locals' English was quite bad.”*

More than half of the respondents perceive their skills to be either very good or excellent. However, several respondents who come from English-speaking countries mention several problems:

#11 *“As English is my native language I think other students and lecturers had difficulty understanding me.”*

#24 *“Language was a slight barrier as although I am a native speaker I am from Scotland therefore slight difference in pronunciation of words.”*

Several students identify some administrative issues or issues with administrative staff. Here is a selection of the participants' responses:

#2 *“I had to change all learning agreement, I didn't receive information about classes cancelled, except the times when I met my professor in the bar and he told me so. Also I had to take courses which does not apply to what I study back home, I failed two subjects for not participating in classes, al thought I have email proofs that professor is saying that there is no need to attend because of the fact that everything will be in Croatian and soooo on.”*

#28 *“International students office at the Filozofski Fakultet in which those responsible could and wanted to speak Croatian only.”*

#39 *“The biggest problem is certificate of temporary residence, it means some people had to pay for it and some not (around 200 kuna).”*

39 *“Too many paperwork for expensive bus ticket. I remember it needed 5 different documents to buy a monthly bus ticket.”*

Two respondents identify workload as the main unexpected problem of their studies, which had a negative impact on their overall exchange experience:

#32 *“1) We had way too much homework to be able to socialize and travel with the fellow Erasmus students. 2) We didn't have lectures and as a result I was getting bored and at the same time I had to stay at home to do my assignments and as a result I didn't get to bond with the other Erasmus students.”*

#28 *“The amount of study.”*

Several respondents state that the interaction with local students outside the classroom was rare, as can be seen from the following selection of the respondents' comments:

5 *“Acceptance by local students.”*

7 *“Cooperation with local students.”*

17 *“I thought that local students would be more open to the internationals.”*

36 *“Local students are not ready to interact.”*

43 *“Interaction with local students.”*

3.7 Respondents' general experience of EMI courses at UNIRI and suggestions for improvement

Besides all potential difficulties or problems that the respondents might have had with their EMI studies, they were asked to assess, on a scale ranging from 1 ('extremely negative') to 5 ('extremely positive'), the general experience of their courses at UNIRI taking all aspects of their studies into consideration. The results show that the vast majority of the respondents (89%) had either positive (60%) or extremely positive (29%) experience of EMI courses at UNIRI.

Considering three different sets of skills that an EMI teacher should develop, 44% of the respondents think that the lecturers need to improve their pedagogic competence to a small extent. Fifty-one per cent of the respondents think that lecturers' intercultural competence should be improved to the same extent. When it comes to the language competence, 40% of the respondents think that it is already sufficiently developed, yet 27% of them think that it should be improved to a large extent. In addition, one respondent commented:

#48 My answer to all three questions above was "to a small extent" because even though the teachers were very competent in all fields. It is very useful to keep on developing your competences and skills.

When asked what could be done to establish (more) effective EMI courses at UNIRI, the respondents most frequently mention: a) general improvement of courses, b) raising awareness of international students' needs and expectations, c) providing help and assistance to lecturers, and d) changing the structure of lectures, i.e. teaching methods.

a) Courses:

15 *“More teachers who speak English fluently.”*

24 *“Collaboration with other universities to establish other English taught courses.”*

32 *“Have courses for every department if the number of students is larger than 3.”*

34 *“Offer courses just for Erasmus students.”*

b) Raising awareness of international audience:

2 *“You need to endorse the local students to be more active and to accept the Erasmus students.”*

17 *“Should understand (at faculty of economics) that we are Erasmus students, we came to study but also to exchange experiences, so sometimes expectations and tasks were overwhelming comparing to the other faculties where students didn't even have to come for classes and got marks for nothing, at the economics faculty we had to work hard to pass exams (just like regular Croatian students).”*

29 *“Some of the teachers need to have more understanding towards international students. Some of them were too critical and "know it all" - The Marketing department at EFRI for example.”*

c) Teachers' assistance:

13 *“Organize trainings with business owners or field working public persons.”*

19 *“Provide help with the translations in English for the teachers, maybe even provide them with English speaking assistant that could better present the subjects and topics or at least translate student questions to teacher or vice versa.”*

26 *“Additional English courses for teachers...”*

d) Teaching methods and structure of lectures:

1 *“Encourage all students to speak in English at the lectures.”*

17 *“Key vocabulary easily explained during the lessons to point what is the main topic, what to remember.”*

38 *“Interacting with the students, work in groups...”*

42 *“Group work.”*

45 *“Work in small group.”*

Ninety-one per cent of the respondents would recommend UNIRI to their peers or friends. Their additional comments are as follows:

26 *“Good place to start adventure with business English.”*

29 *“Amazingly friendly local people, very beautiful country with extraordinary nature, positive experience in the Erasmus community, and many other positive aspects. Great overall experience.”*

37 *“Competent, helpful and very open people and interesting subjects.”*

38 *“They helped me so much (especially with the papers from my University). At UNIRI I have learnt so much, I have known nice people and I think that it is a good place to study there.”*

39 *“I'll be honest with you. I visited Croatia every two years since 2000, and I was always very satisfied. During the 5 month stay in Rijeka I changed my mind.”*

32 *“Not the experience I expected due to lack of classes in my department and due to many assignments to be handed.”*

The space provided for additional comments at the end of the questionnaire was mostly used to express satisfaction with individuals among either administrative or teaching staff. Others used this space to repeat and emphasize what they had already said in the questionnaire. Two of them, however, used the space provided to express their satisfaction with the aim of the present study:

29 *“Keep promoting Rijeka as a place for international studies, and it might grow the overall quality of life of the city as well. Don't stop constantly improving this experience, and you'll reach the maximum satisfaction and amplification effects of this programme.”*

39 *“My Dear Friends, keep going! Only the weather is against you. The professors are very professional and helpful.”*

4 Discussion

There are many obstacles that international students face when deciding to take part in an EMI course. They have to “[...] navigate academic life with these added layers of complexity [...]” (Wallitisch 2014: 33). To be more precise, they do not only have to adjust to the new culture, new educational environment, new local language, and new people, they also have to adjust to EMI. What exacerbates the problem is the fact that not all international students possess adequate language skills, i.e. their language is “[...] insufficient to cope with the level of formality, abstraction and precision that is expected in a university subject both in terms of receptive and productive skills” (Cots 2013: 108).

However, the findings of our study show that more than half of the respondents mostly or completely consider themselves proficient enough in English to successfully take part in an EMI course. This is in accordance with the respondents’ self- assessment of language proficiency. If we, however, compare these results with the results obtained from the study conducted with local students at UNIRI (Drljača Margić and Žeželić 2015), we can see that the difference between international and local students’ perception of their own competences in English is greater than expected. One possible explanation is that international students’ positive perception of their language skills is influenced by their positive experience of EMI courses. In contrast, many local students have never studied abroad, and fear to try it because they perceive studying in a foreign language as extremely demanding.

The English language proficiency is vital not only for academic adjustment but also for the social one (Andrade 2006). When it comes to the social lives of our respondents, the findings show that the local students are not really sociable and outgoing outside the classroom. On one hand, the majority of the respondents feel generally accepted by local students and are satisfied with their support. On the other hand, the majority of them report

that international and local students do not come in contact very often once the lessons are finished, as supported by the following comment: “*We couldn’t socialize to the same extent as the other exchange students as a result of not having lectures to attend daily with other students*” (#32).

The assumption can be drawn that local and international students interact the most during lessons, which is considered to be sufficient support by many of our respondents. However, there is a number of those who emphasize that the local students’ support is missing. One possible reason for this might be that “[...] many domestic students are just not aware of the presence of international students or tend to avoid interaction [...]” (Otten 2003: 20). Nevertheless, these individual comments should not be ignored because “on a personal level, international students may develop new outlooks, increase their self-esteem and confidence and mature as a result of their independent life experiences in another culture” (Sherry, Thomas and Hong Chui 2009: 35). Local students are great part of this culture, and without their sufficient support, acceptance and understanding, these positive outcomes of mobility could come into question and leave international students feeling disappointed and uncomfortable. The strategies should be made at the universities to provide international audience with positive educational and cultural experience, and not simply “[...] admit foreign students and expect them to adjust to life in a new country and educational system without appropriate support and programming” (Andrade 2006: 133).

One of the ways to overcome these barriers is not only to inform local students about the advantages and opportunities of EMI and the benefits that come along, but also to inform them about incoming international audience, to raise awareness of their presence, and to ensure that intercultural contact takes place. Volet and Ang (1998: 21–22) suggest that “the presence of international students on university campus provides a unique social forum for enhancing all students’ understanding and appreciation of the richness of other cultures [...]”

Since opportunities for inter-cultural learning are seldom taken spontaneously, tertiary institutions have a social responsibility to design learning environments which foster students' development of inter-cultural adaptability as one of the major aims of the internationalization of higher education." In order to encourage students to engage in inter-cultural interactions and become more open-minded, the university could organise different workshops and meetings where international and local students could share experiences, talk about customs and simply get to know each other. Establishing communication between these two groups is a key to success and it would "help the two groups find common ground to share, and to allow the students to co-create the environment they need to reach their highest potential" (Heigham 2015: 73).

Teaching in a foreign language, in this case English, is very demanding for lecturers. The introduction of English-medium courses brings a range of difficulties, such as the insufficient level of proficiency, adapted methodology of teaching, undeveloped intercultural competence, etc. Both teachers and students find themselves in a new, challenging environment, or, as Björkman (2010: 78) describes it, they are "novices to the situation". According to the results of the present study, the respondents consider their lecturers to be proficient in English, yet the spontaneity in teaching was rated with the lowest score. This is supported by the comment: *"The courses were very good. But it could be interesting to involve the student more, less "pre made" tasks and lessons and getting the students involved in the planning and creating of the courses"* (#48).

This lack of spontaneity in teaching, humour, sharing personal experiences and examples, as well as telling jokes during the lectures was also corroborated by other studies (Airey 2011; Gürtler and Kronewald 2015). This comes as no surprise because the teachers' ability to elaborate in class, to use humour and maintain dynamics requires very high proficiency in language. In many cases, teachers are proficient enough to teach in English and

get their message across; however, they usually give too much attention to language performance, which disables them to improvise. Many of them also prepare teaching notes in advance and try to minimize spontaneous interaction in order to avoid risky situations of being unprepared. This is in line with Klaassen and de Graaff's results (2001: 4) according to which “ [...] the focus on language production influences the lecturers didactic skills in the sense that, they are less flexible in conveying the contents of the lecture-material, resulting in long monologues, a lack of report with students, humour and interaction”.

While speaking about didactic skills of the lecturers, it is worth mentioning that more than a third of the respondents think that lectures should be more learner-centred. In addition, the aspect of maintaining students' attention was rated with one of the lowest scores. Consequently, “one gets impression that spoken language, often in the form of lecture-based sessions with little interactivity, is rather dominant in EMI [...] while group work and discussions are given less space” (Cots 2013: 110). The author suggests that EMI practice requires an adaptation of teaching methodology, i.e. changing the focus from the lecturer to the student. By using questions, the lecturer does not only encourage students to participate but also checks out their previous knowledge, and shifts the responsibility from the teacher to the students. It has also been argued that learner-centred approach places an emphasis on students' responsibility by making them in charge of the content and way of learning (Gibbs 1999), and that it stimulates students to become more effective learners (Cannon 2000). It has also been suggested that by increasing interactivity in the classroom and placing an emphasis on the students, more opportunities for the negotiation of meaning and clarification can be made (Björkmann 2010), and the pressure of speaking English in front of the whole class can be lessened (Airey 2015). Other authors mention that some international students hesitate to speak in class and ask questions. Some of these students come from cultures and educational environments where it is not allowed to ask questions or criticize teachers (Todd 1997), and

where the learning is seen as receiving the knowledge of an authority without questioning it (Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas 2000), which can lead to the lack of interaction in class (Wallitsch 2014). Therefore, learner-centred approach could help these students to “contribute actively in creating successful communication and effective learning” (Jensen, Denver, Mees and Werther 2013: 107). Teachers need to adapt their teaching style, i.e. they have to be trained to learn “how to modify their input, assure comprehension via students-initiated interactional modifications and create an atmosphere where students operating in an L2 are not afraid to speak; all this whilst taking into account the many cultural differences present in the room and the potentially different language levels of individuals” (Dearden 2014: 23).

Pronunciation is often considered as one of the most important aspects of teachers’ language, and Wilkinson (2013: 18) suggests that “students’ attention is drawn [...] above all to pronunciation: relatively minor pronunciation problems can elicit strong negative reactions from students.” Others state that “for EM instruction, the most frequent source of difficulty appears to involve unclear pronunciation/word segmentation [...]” (Hellekjær 2010: 24). No such results were obtained from our study, as the majority of the respondents were satisfied with their teachers’ pronunciation.

The teachers’ ability to paraphrase was also rated with a high score, which may indicate that teachers employ pragmatic strategies that are crucial when teaching in foreign language. Other pragmatic strategies include asking questions, repetition, giving examples, clarification, elaboration, etc. Klaassen and de Graaff (2001: 12) also mention “using confirmation checks, applying reminders, using redundant information, structuring material by means of core statement, pointing out academic and technical vocabulary necessary for success, using different kinds of interaction” as teachers’ supportive tools. These strategies are usually used in every teaching context because they facilitate understanding. But in the context of EMI it is even more important to use them, as they help with getting the correct

message across and make content clear. The research by Grift, Meijer and van der Salm (2012: 13) shows that “students find it more important that their teachers are able to explain the material well and that they are able to raise students’ interest for a particular field, than they speak English well.” Similarly, the research by Björkman (2010) shows that the lecturers’ pragmatic ability may even be more important than the proficiency in English.

Although teachers can compensate for a lack of English proficiency by using different strategies, the teachers’ proficiency still plays a major role in every EMI teaching environment. According to the results, the respondents were satisfied with the quality of teaching and general proficiency of the teachers. The highest scores were given to the teachers’ knowledge of specialist terminology and vocabulary range. This means that, even though it may be very demanding for them to teach academic subjects via English, and, above all, to use and explain specialist vocabulary that students need to acquire, the teachers at UNIRI obviously possess some adequate teaching skills. It may also be the case that teachers find knowledge of content specific vocabulary to be more important than some other aspects of their language and teaching, and therefore try very hard to be good at it. Kling (2015: 219) reports that “the lecturers claim that they do not really care much about particular aspects of accuracy in their production. They are willing to accept these aspects of their language proficiency as long as their content specific vocabulary is in place.”

However, the results regarding teachers’ language competence in general are quite interesting. Many respondents think that it is already sufficiently developed while, at the same time, many respondents think it has to be improved to a large extent. It is hard to come up with an explanation, but it may be the case that there is a great difference between individual teachers. Some of them have great command of the language, while others lack skills. This is supported by the comments: “*It’s hard to evaluate generally the department as I had some good teachers with excellent English and some who were at most average*” (#26) and “*Most*

teachers could speak fluently enough to teach their lessons, only a few of them should improve their English” (# 46).

It seems that the lecturers’ lack of command in English is the exception rather than the rule. It has to be borne in mind that UNIRI offers a limited number of EMI courses, taught by a limited number of teachers. The majority of them decided to take part in an EMI practice, which probably indicates that their command of language is sufficient. Conversely, those inadequately proficient should be provided language support. Finally, there is an urgent need to train new academic staff that could engage in EMI courses.

“The implementation of EMI programmes has to be carefully planned, providing highly qualified teachers (both in content and language) [...]” (Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra 2013: 216), but the question remains: How can this be achieved? Several suggestions for improvement can be suggested at this point. Firstly, the tests should be administrated to all lecturers to gather information about their language level, i.e. to assess whether they “have the necessary foreign language skills to cope with the communicative demands of teaching in EMI programs” (Kling 2015: 203). Consequently, different trainings should be organised for teachers “[...] to help academic and teaching staff to cope with and prepare for the challenges arising from teaching their specialized subjects in English (e.g. providing EMI training workshops)” (Li 2013: 80). The aim of such trainings/workshops would be to raise lecturers’ awareness of different problematic aspects of EMI, to give them English lessons and provide an opportunity to practice necessary teaching skills in L2 learning context. Additionally, meetings between new staff and experienced lecturers can be organised, where “[...] new lecturers can watch and analyse video footage of their lectures and discuss issues with other teachers [...] to help lecturers in their process of adjustment to teaching in English” (Airey 2015: 170–171).

As for the students' development of English proficiency during the period of mobility, the vast majority of the respondents say that their English competences improved during the exchange period. This is in contrast with previous research, where Wilkinson (2013) suggests that many students' competences do not improve during their studies. Furthermore, a study conducted by Li (2013) shows that many students feel frustrated and do not perceive any progress in English proficiency. Our findings show that it is possible that, in addition to the knowledge in their fields of study, the students in EMI courses can benefit in many other ways, i.e. EMI can contribute to their improvement of language skills. One respondent had especially positive experience and said: “[...] *the vocabulary I learnt and speaking fluency I achieved helped me find a job in Poland after I came back*” (#26). UNIRI should strive to get more comments like this one.

Next, there is a paradox that can be observed in the results of our study. The majority of students say that they are satisfied with the quality of courses and lecturers' teaching, and their general proficiency in English. However, the majority of them also think that it is important to have a native speaker as a teacher, which was not the case at UNIRI. Learners of English develop ideal image of native speakers as the best model for language learning, i.e. “in language learning and teaching, the native speaker has been positioned as an ideal model, being someone who has acquired the language as a child, uses it in ‘authentic’ contexts and therefore has ownership over how the language is used correctly” (McCambridge and Saarinen 2015: 296). Cook (1999) also investigated the concept of native vs. non-native speakers in language teaching and argues that very often, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation that differ from native usage are treated as failure and that native speakers are often assumed to make better teachers. However, the author (1999: 200) also emphasizes that “[...] students may feel overwhelmed by native-speaker teachers who achieved a perfection that is out of the students reach [...] students may prefer the fallible nonnative-speaker teacher

who presents a more achievable model.” In another study conducted by Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2011: 12), the data also indicate that “students understand the speech of non-natives better than the speech of natives.” Björkman (2010: 87) concludes that “[...] lecturers who are highly proficient in English do not necessarily make good lecturers” and “[...] a speaker can be highly proficient, or may even be a native speaker, but if s/he does not use enough pragmatic strategies when addressing an international audience, the message may get lost.” It is still not clear whether our respondents consider native-speaker of English to be important in an EMI context because they had developed this ideal image of native speaker over time, as indicated in other studies. It might also be the case that many of our respondents have not even had an opportunity to have native speaker as a lecturers and therefore firmly believe that a native-like model would be the most appropriate one.

Finally, the number of English-taught courses offered at UNIRI was rated as rather satisfying. It must be borne in mind, however, that those international students who studied at UNIRI probably found courses that were relevant and interesting to them. What remains unknown is the number of students who wanted to study at UNIRI, but had to change their mind because they could not find courses pertinent to them.

5 Conclusion

The findings reveal that academic reputation of the university does not play any role in international students' decision to study at UNIRI. This clearly shows that there is an urgent need to start working on the image of the university and its promotion because the stronger the reputation of the university the more international students will be attracted.

When it comes to the students' perception of their own English proficiency, it was rated quite high, and they considered themselves to be proficient enough to successfully take part in an EMI course. Moreover, general respondents' satisfaction with other aspects of their studies, such as the quality of lecturers' teaching and language, the quality of courses, and the support provided, were rated also rather high, and none of the aspects were rated negatively.

However, after the analysis of students own comments and responses to open-ended questions, it was hard not to notice that many individual respondents still faced different difficulties. One of them was insufficient English proficiency of a few individual teachers. Some students had problems with increased workload or administration procedures, some of them with the shortage of courses available. All of this shows that, although the results obtained in this study are generally satisfying, many shortcomings were listed by the respondents, and much more effort, research and energy need to be invested to improve international ranking of UNIRI. In addition, it is questionable how many students wanted to study at UNIRI, but could not find adequate courses/programmes that would satisfy their academic needs.

The scope of this study is limited to the international students at only one Croatian university, and therefore cannot be considered representative. Regarding this relatively limited sample of participants, the findings must be interpreted with caution. We do, however, think that this study contributes to the better understanding of EMI practice in Croatia and

opens up opportunities for further research, which would involve a larger sample of students from different Croatian universities. Moreover, further research could also be conducted in the form of interviews in order to find out more about current academic, social and cultural issues that incoming students encounter. It would be also interesting to investigate attitudes and experiences of teachers in EMI, particularly their experiences with international students. Considering the rapid expansion of English-taught programmes worldwide, largely entailing the presence of international students, further research into the experiences of those involved is of paramount importance.

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